

### *The Woodsman* Full disclosure

by [Julia Lesage](#) and [Chuck Kleinhans](#)



Vicki fights back vigorously after a co-worker at the mill harrasses her. Later Walter asks her if she is all right, and ...



...thinking of him as a gentle and caring man, she gives him a ride home.



*The Woodsman*, a low-budget independent production, depicts a child molester's return to the community after 12 years in prison. The script revolves around the difficulties this man, Walter, played by Kevin Bacon, has both because of his own psychology and because of the social difficulties a released molester faces. The film mobilizes excellent acting, art direction, and cinematography to work through, in a low-key way, the tensions within the storyline and thus to evoke or work with the contradictory emotions and perspectives various individual viewers bring to the film's subject. [Jamie Bennett's preceding article](#) considers the film in terms of the larger issues of social and political policy it raises. Here we want to concentrate on the interplay of audience emotional responses and aesthetic decisions made by the film's creators

Bacon plays Walter as a person with low affect. The details of Walter's past are presented in a sparse and incomplete way, leaving it to the viewer to fill in with additional assumptions. For instance, at the beginning of the film in the credit sequence, we see someone fingerprinted and Bacon on a bus moving to a new place. Later, when he reveals the details of his imprisonment to his lover Vicki, played by Kyra Sedgwick, he says only that he desires girls ages ten to twelve, and that he "never hurt them." In therapy, he says he took naps with his sister when very small and later loved to smell her hair. We do not know if he molested his sister, although it is an important element of the script that the sister is very angry with him and he would like to re-establish a relation with her. What we understand of Walter is often based on his body language, particularly when aggressive encounters with police sergeant Lucas, his therapy sessions, or his own attraction to girls make him feel despair about his future.



She ask him what his "secret" is but he does not say. Then she comes on to him.



The sex scene intercuts beginning, middle, and end in a mixed up order. Later in bed, Vicki comments it was "very intense."



This reaction shot of Walter in the bathroom mirror invites the viewer to imagine his response to having sex freely after years in prison.



Director Nicole Kassell co-wrote the script with the play *The Woodsman*'s original author, Stephen Fetcher, adding workplace scenes to expand the story's visual possibilities. In the storyline, Walter is at the hub, with each of the other characters adding a dimension to our understanding of him as each character introduces situations he must respond to. What makes this kind of plot construction particularly effective for dealing with this particular theme, the return of a sexual offender to the community, is that the situations brought into play by each character also provide a point of identification for the viewer.

Probably for most viewers, the viewing experience is an uncomfortable one. The film raises many issues that, as *social* issues, it does not resolve. By placing Walter's experiences at the center and because of Bacon's effective low key, but emotionally intense, performance, the main direction of the plot seems to evoke at least a momentary identification with his problems reintegrating into workplace and personal life. However, viewers are also prompted to take a position, often ambivalent or contradictory in their sum, held by the other figures in the film.

## Walter in society

The key other people in Walter's life are these: his therapist, who tries to get Walter to be more self-conscious of his emotions; his employer, who is strictly by-the-book honest and fair; Mary Kay, a workplace secretary interested in Walter; the other workers who are mere background until Walter's past crimes are revealed; Vicki, his co-worker and then girlfriend; Carlos, his brother-in-law; Sgt. Lucas, a hardboiled cop who is skeptical that child molesters can be rehabilitated; Robin, a pre-teen girl Walter meets in a public park. Walter also watches "Candy," his name for a young man who seems to be trying to pick up boys from the nearby elementary school. At the very end of the film he meets his sister, Annette, in a park. Each person brings out a different facet of Walter's situation.

When Walter goes to his new workplace, a lumber yard and mill works, the boss accepts him because his father had long been a good worker there. Later, when Walter's co-workers find out he is listed on an Internet site about sexual offenders, they gang up to hit him, but the boss steps in and asserts Walter's right to a job. In contrast, a secretary in the lumberyard had flirted with Walter but he expressed no interest in her and later started a relation with another woman



Vicki wakes Walter up one afternoon when he has a nightmare.



She asks him what he did, what he was in prison for.



After he tells her, she laughs because she cannot believe it.



Walter replies, "Twelve years in prison is no joke." The close up from behind his head expresses his isolation and expectation of social rejection. Vicki leaves him, shocked at what he

there. Presumably because she was rebuffed, the secretary, Mary Kay, became determined to discover the nature of Walter's offense and then put printouts of the Internet posting in every worker's locker. Her justification was, "Everyone has a right to know." What makes this subplot more complex than it seems on the surface is that Mary Kay has children's drawing on her bulletin board, and in fact, her defense is a position that many viewers, especially parents, may feel about sex offender registries and neighbors' and co-workers' "right to know."

In a similar way, counterpoising what any ex-con would need begin a new life (a job, a chance to be free of overt harassment, etc.) with attitudes toward offenders that individuals and communities commonly assume, Walter has particularly harsh confrontations with a detective who intrudes on his personal space to harangue him. Played in an emphatic performative style that contrasts with Bacon's enactment of self-effacement, possibly depression, Mos Def's Sgt. Lucas threatens and belittles Walter and speaks an institutional law-enforcement perspective that uses "worst case" thinking — about events he has experienced as a cop. Lucas assumes recidivism for child abusers and is resentful that he has to wait for new crimes of molestation in order to get them back in jail. Letting himself into Walter's apartment, he reduces Walter to helplessness there, saying he could push Walter out the window and no one would care. When Walter protests, "You can't talk to me like that," Lucas responds that no one would believe him and that he would "just be a dead piece of shit." From then on, in all their encounters, Walter just has to sit still and listen to what Lucas hands out. When Lucas describes one of the terrible cases of child rape he had to deal with, he also elaborates verbally the kind of discourse about murder and mayhem long used to narrate sensational cases. Such a *frisson* accompanying vivid descriptions terrible crimes, especially sexual ones, has a long history. It was exploited in 19th century England with tales of Jack the Ripper and still is exploited in crime dramas in film and television today. This kind of description of sexual crimes circulates in the social imaginary and comes to the fore in moments of moral panic, and thus is part of the repertory of image-memory that shapes audience response, even to a film sympathetic to ex-offender like *The Woodsman*.

Currently in primetime TV police procedurals such as *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, *Without a Trace*, or *CSI*, dramatic narratives frequently involve finding an endangered child victim and protecting the victim, while catching and



told her, but comes back later to give him a "tough" ivy plant as a gesture of conciliation.



Walter travels to and from work by bus, tempted by the close physical presence of girls.



This overhead shot shows Walter exiting at his stop. Another time, when he sees...



...Robin on the bus, he does not get off at his stop but continues to get off

prosecuting the perpetrator. And, as Elayne Rapping points out in her book *Law and Justice: As Seen on TV*, the way TV presents crime across types and genres — fiction, documentary, news and talk show — is to show pursuit, capture and conviction, but not prison and rehabilitation. She argues that TV defines crime in remarkably restricted way that moves again and again to show how "the system works" (even if "imperfectly" but never to examine the deeper structures that surround the depicted events. Rapping asserts,

"For if we treat sexual offenders and batterers as merely and essentially 'evil,' and women in need of nothing more than protection or revenge by the state, where have our demands gone for ending sexism, much less for the freedom to determine the terms by which our lives, in general, are lived."  
(165-66)

In terms of *The Woodsman*, Walter has a reprieve from being harassed by Lucas because in the climax scene Walter severely beats a homosexual molester, whom Walter observed and named "Candy," near a schoolyard outside Walter's apartment. A flashframe of Walter on the ground being beaten interspersed with shots of Candy being hammered by Walter's fists indicates that the filmmaker's intention was to show that Walter's fury derived from his anger at himself as well as at Candy. The final time that Lucas visits Walter's apartment, just as Walter is packing to move in with Vicki, indicates that Lucas knows Walter has done this, but that Candy is a rapist wanted in another state and in some way Walter has earned Lucas' grudging respect. The scene has credence because Candy is seen as a violent predator, yet the whole Candy subplot may also be interpreted as homophobic with the theme of the seducer outside the schoolyard deflected away from Walter, and in fact with Walter being the one who deals with the crime in terms of vigilante action, subsequently condoned by the police. Again, viewer response is structured by the *contrast* between Walter and Candy and by Walter's reaction to Candy, but the exact nature of that viewer response is conditioned by the set of issues and emotions viewers bring to the film. The sequence of events also leaves hanging the question of Walter's initial complicity in Candy's crime by not reporting the pedophile's behavior of hanging around the schoolyard and trying to chat with boys.

Both socially and emotionally, *The Woodsman's* plot and characterization set in place complex structures of feeling which challenge viewers to understand issues of child



when she does and follow her into the park.



Walter gets angry at the therapist for sitting behind him saying he cannot tolerate anyone behind him, presumably a reference to the prison rapes he experienced as a convicted child molester. This is another example of the film's leaving it to viewers to fill in the details.



"Why do you stay?"  
"Because I see something good in you that you don't see yet." "The odds aren't good for guys like me."

predation and molestation in new and different ways. The script plays off the fact that audience members have a range of reactions, intellectual and emotional, to the issues and situations involved. This includes not only political and abstract levels of response, but also the personal and the immediate.

## Walter's personal world

Walter has two main sources of emotional support — his brother in law, Carlos, and his lover, Vicki. In addition, he has a very intense personal if brief interaction with a child he meets in a park, Robin. These intimate scenes give the film the chance to explore issues of parenting, intimacy, desire, and childhood sexuality. Our culture exhibits as symptoms its anxieties about childhood sexuality. This may be because humans develop so slowly and gradually that there is a long period of time before reaching maturity. The development of human *sexuality* goes on for the long periods of *childhood* development and adolescence — when children are legally, morally, under the supervision of their parents. Thus the processes of child's emotional growth and a parent's supervision are always fraught with complexities, and childhood sexual development is especially stressful — for both parent and youth. Although children's sexuality is open to view, from infancy on, acknowledging it in all its facets, including parents' and children's potential sexual attraction to each other, is largely unrecognized, repressed, or denied.

Carlos is the first to visit Walter when he gets out. Carlos is loyal to Walter because Walter gave him support when none of the rest of the family would approve of one of their member's engagement to a "brown man." Carlos' wife and Walter's sister, Annette, wants nothing to do with Walter, and at one point, Carlos brings back a table to Walter that the woodsman had designed and built for the couple's wedding present because Annette wanted it out of the house. At the tag end of the film, Carlos arranges for a meeting between brother and sister in a park that does not turn out well (seen only in longshot) but the implication is the extended family is trying to deal with matters in some way. In viewer response to the film on [imdb.com](http://imdb.com), a number of readers assumed that Walter had molested his sister, but it can also be interpreted that Annette wants to protect her pubescent daughter.

A series of misunderstandings between Carlos and Walter about Carlos's girl Carla add another dimension to potential viewer response. At one point Carlos talks about how much he

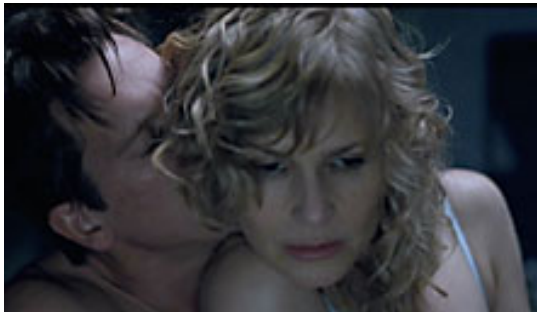




Vicki tells how she was molested by her brothers ...



... and also how she and they very much love each other.



With Vicki, Walter repeats the seduction pattern he had with his sister, sitting on his lap with him smelling her hair. Vicki's face in this scene indicates she may understand his need yet be disturbed by it.

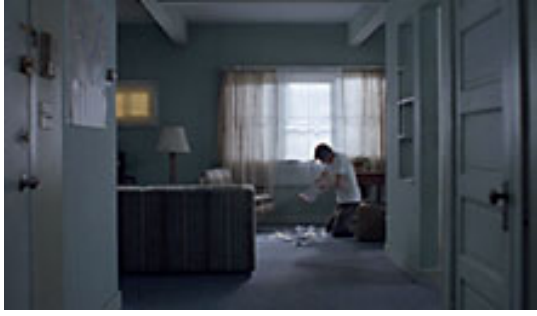
loves Carla and that a parent could never love their child too much. This statement bothers Walter so much that he discusses it with his therapist, thinking Carlos cannot see excessive parental love as a kind of danger sign. At a later moment, Walter asks Carlos if he ever has "feelings" for his child, meaning sexual feelings, which causes Carlos both to grab Walter and to threaten to kill him if he ever molested the child. Again, these two moments can be interpreted in a number of ways. One is that Walter is rather opaque about social cues and interpreting what people tell him, a fact which caused him to alienate the secretary Mary Kay. Another is that he sees something in Carlos that Carlos cannot see in himself, a spectrum between a male parent's attraction to a daughter and active sexual desire for a girl. And the most probable viewer response is, "Yes, if someone I know molested my child, even a member of my extended family, I would want to kill them." Annette is suspicious of Walter, now Carlos is too, and it is significant that at no time in the film is he allowed to meet his niece Carla.

The interactions between Walter and Vicki and between him and the child Robin provide the major plot points in the film. The dialogue at these points indicate the major lessons Walter has to learn on his road to rehabilitation. In its visual scheme, the mise-en-scene emphasizes grays and muted blues, often in a rainy, working class environment. The only exceptions are the lovemaking scenes played in warm flesh-tones, a green ivy plant Vicki gives Walter, a child's red ball, and Robin's bright red coat. The Vicki and the Robin scenes provide Walter's moments of emotional learning.

When Walter first notices Vicki it is in a moment when she is grabbed by a guy at work. She drops the lumber she is carrying and goes after him verbally and physically, actively defending herself. Co-workers observing the scene applaud her feistiness. Later Walter asks her if she is all right, and having noticed him waiting in the rain for his bus, she gives him a ride home. She immediately comes on to him — a possible clue for some in the audience that her aggressive sexual behavior may be a marker of childhood sexualization. In her eyes at this point he is a gentle, caring guy.

Vicki leaves Walter after he tells her of her past, but she comes back with a present of the ivy as a gesture of reconciliation. She tells him she sees something good in him that he does not yet see in himself, to which he responds that the "odds are not good for guys like me." She then tells him "how she survived in a family with three sons." "I got poked around here and there





Walter returns to his apartment in a state of despair after he has been attacked at work. His sense of worthlessness is expressed by the image's composition in depth.



"I am not a monster."



He hallucinates a little girl with a red ball going into his bedroom...

... by all three in chronological order." Walter cannot understand why she does not hate them. She responds:

"I love all of them. They're strong, gentle men with families of their own. And if you ever asked them what they did to me, they'd beat the shit out of you and call you a fucking liar. Hey, I never told anyone that before."

Vicki's experience of molestation has brought her a lot of pain, but it now offers her a way to interact with Walter as she recognizes some of the reality of Walter's situation. Also, her interpretation of incest might match that of some other women, as occurring within a family dynamic that has good components as well as bad, as abuse mingled confusingly with love. Furthermore, many people experience abusive moments that they remember but never choose to talk about, except perhaps as elicited in a therapeutic situation or a particularly intimate moment with a lover. The plot of *The Woodsman* depends on Vicki's returning to Walter with full knowledge of his crime and on his learning about the pain of childhood sexual abuse from her. The way the dialogue has her present this information about incest emphasizes the potentially unique response of every individual to his/her own sexual past. Kyra Sedwick plays Vicki as an independent, sexually experienced, and generous character, and these lines in particular of hers seem aimed to produce a sympathetic viewer response. However, because the film ends with Walter moving in with her, it may seem that the romance plotline rather easily provides a solution to Walter's ongoing sexual attraction to girls. In one lovemaking scene Vicki sits on his lap while he holds her, part of his seduction pattern with children, and smells her hair, the very action he told his therapist was what he did with his younger sister when they were children. Vicki may serve as a socially acceptable (and legal) adult substitution of and displacement for the pubescent girls who he finds attractive.

## Walter and Robin

The inclusion of various scenes showing how Walter is "tempted" by girls seems to indicate that dealing with illicit desire is an ongoing process for the ex-offender, perhaps an addiction like alcoholism. These scenes also make the film difficult to watch, especially the final encounter between Walter and Robin.

Before the final scene of Walter and Robin in the park, there





...and seems to fear for his sanity.



Narrative tension builds as he goes to sit in the park where he and Robin met before. Viewers see that he is angry and fear that demoralization will lead him to return to his old ways.



When Robin comes up to him, his affect changes, and...

are a number of scenes showing Walter's ongoing problems with his sexual desire. We see girls bumping into him in the bus that he takes to and from work, and at one point, he follows Robin into the park for the first time after she gets off the bus. Earlier he had walked through a shopping mall following girls around, and perhaps left when he seemed to be suspicious to a sales clerk and a security guard. When he reported this to his therapist, demanding to know, "When will I ever be normal?" the therapist responded that perhaps he was just testing himself after getting out of prison and that what happened was that there he was discussing the event.

When Walter meets Robin in the park the first time, his body language changes. He smiles and seems genuinely happy for this chance at conversation with her. He offers to show her some place more interesting, for their shared interest — birdwatching, but she says she has to go home. Throughout the film, the most anxiety-producing moments are Walter's struggling with his desire and his contact with or stalking girls, although these are never presented as potentially violent. In this way, script tension is also moral tension. In the final scene, Walter goes to sit in the park after the fight at work. Whether or not he goes to wait to see if Robin comes is not clear, but that is one possible viewer interpretation. When she does come, they again have a friendly conversation, with Walter looking happy. He asks her if she would like to sit on his lap and she says no and then looks sad.

"My Daddy lets me sit on his lap."

"Do you like it when he asks you?"

"No."

(moment of silence)

"Does he move his legs in funny ways?"

(longer moment of silence, Robin with tears welling)

"Walter, do you still want me to sit on your lap. I will. I won't mind."

"No. Go home now."

(Robin hugs Walter goodbye and leaves.)

This scene was prepared for by Vicki's teaching Walter the pain that comes with childhood sexual abuse. But like Vicki's scene, the dialogue here adds complexity. Robin is not "innocent," but as he understands her experience, Walter is prompted to look outside his own desire to its effect on the child. In addition, Robin is also shown as needy, for love, understanding, perhaps companionship. Walter now clearly reacts in terms of an appropriate adult role. However, once





...his smile indicates a genuine moment of happiness, which he seems only able to express with girls.



Robin cries when he asks her to sit on his lap, but...



... a bit later she asks if he still wants her to.

again the film allows for complexity of audience response. Here the dialogue has provided some insight into the consequences of a too early awakening of childhood sexuality by adults. Vicki has implied that she has had a wide variety of sexual experience and that nothing much can shock her; here Robin not only indicates her acceptance of this gentle stranger but also how she too might think of adult sexual expression as a now ordinary fact of life.

The episode also changes Walter. From his earlier claim that he “never hurt” his previous victims, we understand that he was not a violent rapist or aggressive predator. In his mind, up to this point, he allows that a child can give consent to an inappropriate physical relation. And in observing Candy’s solicitation of boys, Walter writes repeatedly in his journal, “the boy wants to go,” which may mean he is struggling to understand what “consent” might mean. In law and in fact, a child cannot give consent. Finally, in the exchange with Robin he sees the tears, understands the pain and the implied violence/coercion, and then refuses her offer. He now understands the child’s point of view. From this new position of empathy he returns home and encounters Candy dropping off a boy he picked up earlier. At this point Walter expresses his rage by becoming the attacker. While the episode illustrates Walter’s changed consciousness, it also implicitly marks vigilante action as re-integrating Walter into the larger community. There’s no indication that Walter will report Robin’s father as an abuser.

Many of the events in the film point to a good resolution for Walter, especially his integration into an adult (heterosexual) relationship. However, it is to the film's credit that its construction will probably lead to viewer disbelief, anger, side-taking, or discomfort at some point in the process of watching or remembering it. In that way, the complexities of potential viewer response to the film parallel the complexities of thinking about how to integrate child abusers released from prison back into the community.

Not exactly an exemplary story, the film can depict a particular dramatic case and deal with the erratic progress of Walter towards rehabilitation. But it does not really address deeper social issues of child abuse and child sexuality, the nature of consent, the limits of the legal system, and so forth. Perhaps no one feature film could cover all the bases. Yet in a media environment that sensationalizes the relatively rare cases of stranger abduction, molestation, and murder in news, talk shows, docu-crime, and police procedurals, and





downplays the much more common incidence of child sexual abuse in families and among networks of friends and neighbors, it is rare to have a narrative of gradual and uneven reform and change. *The Woodsman* isn't the last word, but it is a start.

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He finally understands the emotional pain experienced by a molested child.

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The resolution of the film is that Walter is formally integrated into a stable heterosexual relationship.